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# *Gray Zone Conflicts, Challenges, and Opportunities*

*Executive Summaries of Team Reports*

Prepared for  
Strategic Multi-Layer Assessment  
Gray Zone Conflicts, Challenges, and Opportunities: A Multi-  
Agency Deep Dive Assessment  
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## Specifying & systematizing how we think about the Gray Zone.

*Bragg, B. (NSI, Inc.).*

In their continued work on the changing nature of the threat environment General Votel et al forecast that the majority of threats to US security interests in coming years will be found in a ‘gray zone’ between acceptable competition and open warfare. They define the gray zone as ‘characterized by intense political, economic, informational, and military competition more fervent in nature than normal steady-state diplomacy, yet short of conventional war.’ While this characterization is a useful guide, it is general enough that efforts by planners, scholars and analysts to add the level of specificity needed for their tasks can generate considerable variation in how the term is applied, and to which types of actions and settings it applies.

### *What lies between acceptable competition and conventional war?*

Far from an unnecessarily academic or irrelevant question, this is a critical question. How we define a condition or action, in other words the frame through which we are categorizing certain actions as threatening rather than “normal steady-state” impacts what we choose to do about them. The “I know it when I see it” case-by-case determination of gray vs not gray limits identification of gray zone actions to those that have already occurred. Gaining some clarity on the nature of a gray zone challenges is essential for effective security coordination and planning, development of indicators and warning measures, assessments of necessary capabilities and authorities and development of effective deterrent strategies.

The ambiguous nature of the gray zone and the complex and fluid international environment of which it is a part, make it unlikely that there will be unanimous agreement about its definition. Our first goal in this paper then, is to describe the gray zone as much as define it. We begin with a review the work of a number of authors who have written on the nature and characteristics of gray zone challenges, and use these to identify areas of consensus regarding the characteristics of the gray space between steady-state competition and open warfare. We next use these to suggest a more systematic process for characterizing different shades of gray zone challenges.

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## Risk and Ambiguity in the Gray Zone

*Wright, N. (University of Birmingham, ICCS)*

Risk and ambiguity are central to activities in the Gray Zone. Policymakers can manipulate risk, and use it as a tool for deterrence or escalation management. They can also manipulate ambiguity. In the Gray Zone understanding risk and ambiguity is key to achieve intended and avoid unintended effects.

*(I) What are risk and ambiguity?* Defining risk and ambiguity are highly contentious because there are multiple overlapping definitions across different disciplines. This is a classic case of different languages in different disciplines (and in normal language) that can’t be resolved here. However, the basic concepts are not that complicated or confusing.

Here we use a common perspective in economics, psychology and neuroscience. This makes “a distinction between prospects that involve risk and those that involve ambiguity. Risk refers to a

situation in which all of the probabilities are known. Ambiguity refers to a situation in which some of the probabilities are unknown”

This maps on to Sec. Def. Rumsfeld’s famous distinction: “Reports that say that something hasn’t happened are always interesting to me, because as we know, there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns – the ones we don’t know we don’t know. And if one looks throughout the history of our country and other free countries, it is the latter category that tend to be the difficult ones.”

*(II) Ambiguity in international confrontations:* Ambiguity in events and actions gives an extra layer of uncertainty, so they are open to multiple interpretations before we even consider their risk. Cases include: (1) Ambiguity is a key tool in diplomacy. E.g. the 2001 Sino-US crisis where an EP-3 reconnaissance plane force-landed on Hainan Island was resolved by a letter that could be interpreted one way by the Chinese for their public, another by the US for their public. (2) The use of “Little green men” makes an offensive action more ambiguous and so more easily deniable – e.g. at least for observing populations in key allies even if not for US security analysts. (3) How far is a specific action of a local proxy directed by the adversary? (3) Ambiguous thresholds for deterrent threats enable less loss of face if they are crossed, e.g. compared to hard “red lines”. (4) Concessions are critical to managing escalation, and essential when dealing with a nuclear-armed adversary. Ambiguity means they can be offered deniably, e.g. Nixon and Mao. Indeed, clarity too early can prevent later compromise. (5) Economic actions by possible proxies carry ambiguity, e.g. Chinese companies investments on key Pacific Islands. Robert Jervis (1970) includes an excellent chapter on ambiguity, particularly in diplomacy.

*(III) Risk in international confrontations:* Risk arises when potential outcomes are uncertain, and this pervades all human decision-making. (1) Consider US, UK and German troops currently deploying to NATO’s east, such as the Baltic Republics. Their placement is unambiguous, and provides a tripwire so that there is the risk of escalation if there were serious aggression. This is a classic use of the risk of escalation, as described by Thomas Schelling who devotes a chapter to the “Manipulation of Risk” in his seminal *Arms and Influence* (1966). Schelling describes how the risk is that escalation can develop its own momentum and this must be managed, e.g. as during the Cuban Missile Crisis. (2) Schelling also argues that “limited war, as a deterrent to continued aggression or as a compelling means of intimidation, often seems to require interpretation ... as an action that enhances the risk of a greater war.” – and in the same way, the purpose of entering the gray zone at all can be to manipulate risk. (3) A key distinction from ambiguity is that probabilities are better understood with risk, and thus good baseline data can help turn events from ambiguous to risky.

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## Geopolitical Visions in Chinese Media

*Hinck, R., Manly, J., Kluver, R. & Norris, W. (Texas A&M University)*

USPACOM requested that the SMA team initiate an effort to provide the Command analytical capability to identify areas of strategic risk and opportunity in the Asia- Pacific region over the next

two decades. These capabilities should enable the Command to examine future political, security, societal, and economic trends; identify where US strategic interests are in cooperation or conflict with Chinese and other interests worldwide, and in particular, with regard to the East China Sea; and leverage opportunities when dealing with China in a “global context”.

In order to better understand the strategic context in which the leadership of the Peoples’ Republic of China makes its foreign policy decisions, this study analyzed Chinese web media in an effort to uncover key frames and cultural scripts that are likely to shape potential geopolitical relationships in the region. The team provided an overview of Chinese media and developed individual reports on cultural scripts in media coverage of three key issues: a) China’s relationships with its regional neighbors, b) the geopolitical dimensions of the “China Dream” (中国梦), and c) Chinese discourse around the “New Style Great Power Relations” (新型大国关系). Data was collected from May to October 2014. Over 2,200 media articles were analyzed from 25 different Chinese media sources controlled for ownership, political slant, official versus, and popular media outlets.

While understanding today’s news agenda will not predict China’s policy over a two decade timeline, the news agenda and media coverage can help uncover deeper components of Chinese political culture, including Chinese leaders’ world views, assumptions, and geopolitical expectations. Daily media coverage enacts cultural scripts, and in the case of Chinese media in particular, reflect carefully crafted policy positions agreed upon by Chinese elites behind closed doors. While specific policies can change quite quickly, the underlying societal scripts and political culture are more enduring. Thus, media analysis can help unveil grand narratives of Chinese political visions and capture the underlying national mood which provides constraints to future behavior.

### *Key Findings*

- Chinese foreign policy discourse portrays China as primarily responding to international provocation. China is seen as needing to respond to provocative actions committed by others.
- China seeks a stable international environment. Its economic and military rise provides opportunities for all nations to benefit.
- The U.S. and its regional allies are seen as perpetuating a false China Threat thesis aimed at containing China. The U.S. is seen as the primary enabler of aggressive policies committed by Japan and the Philippines.
- The Chinese media heavily relies on historical allusions to paint Japan as a militant country.
- The U.S. is the overwhelming most important and frequently discussed country regarding China’s international relations.
- The China Dream constitutes a domestic and international vision describing China’s peaceful rise promising mutual benefit to all those willing to share in China’s rise.
- The China Dream promises economic prosperity, a return to military strength, emphasizes China’s cultural prestige, and legitimizes the Chinese Communist Parties role in reestablishing China’s greatness following its century of humiliation beginning with the Opium Wars in the 1840s.
- The New Style of Great Power Relations is China’s attempt to avoid the pathologies of historical Great Power conflict with the United States. The concept lays out significant areas for U.S.-China economic and military cooperation, but challenges U.S. policy in the Asia Pacific as failing

to live up to the tacitly agreed upon principles of mutual respect and positive relations between the two nations.

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## Examinations of Saudi-Iranian Gray Zone Competition in MENA, and of Potential Outcomes of the Flow of Foreign Fighters to the United States

*Capps, R., Ellis, D. & Wilkenfeld, J. (University of Maryland, START)*

The United States is regularly challenged by the actions of states and non-state actors in the nebulous, confusing, and ambiguous environment known as the Gray Zone. Planners, decision makers, and operators within the national security enterprise need to understand what tools are available for their use in the Gray Zone and how to best develop, employ, and coordinate those tools. This report summarizes the results of simulations created and executed by the ICONS Project as part of a larger study to capture at least some of the information needed toward that end.

On October 24, 26, and 28, 2016, under the guidance of the Pentagon's Office of Strategic Multi-Layer Assessment and the Department of Homeland Security's Office of University Programs, staff of the ICONS Project at the University of Maryland executed three simulations. Two of these examined competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia in the Gray Zone, both direct and through proxies. The third examined the threat to the homeland of a collapse of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.

Participants in the simulations were drawn from various U.S. government agencies and from universities, research centers, think tanks, foreign governments and militaries. Within each of the three simulations participants were given start states and asked to react to events introduced into the scenario. Broadly, the start states placed the participants in mid-2017, about six months into a new U.S. administration. They were told the USG had placed a priority on understanding and shaping the relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia (in two of the simulations) or in understanding and protecting the homeland against any threat evolving from the competition between Islamic State and Al Qaida (in the third). Play in each of the simulations took place virtually with participants joining via ICONSnet from around the world. Each of the three simulations ran for four hours.

*There were five principal take-aways from these simulations:*

- It may not be possible for the U.S. to influence or shape Gray Zone activities by other states, especially when those actions are not directed toward the United States. When two states or a mix of state and non-state actors want to engage in the Gray Zone, there may be little the U.S. can do to stop them. Sometimes the only possible action is no action other than planning for likely results.
- Violent extremist organizations may act in the Gray Zone in an attempt to drag state actors out of the Gray Zone. State actors need to have appropriate strategies developed and responses queued for rapid delivery.
- To operate effectively in the Gray Zone, U.S. policy designers and operators need access to every available tool; a whole-of-government approach is crucial to success. In fact, we should begin to think in terms of a whole-of-government-plus structure where government reaches

out to non- government regional and technical specialists, subject matter experts, and other “different thinkers” to formulate courses of action.

- Controllers noted a clear bias among the U.S. government participants toward Saudi Arabia and against Iran, and a willingness to move rapidly to kinetic or other military action by some of the military players. Such an overt bias may adversely affect the ability of the U.S. to take advantage of opportunities for influence in Gray Zone conflicts.

Participants in the Iran-Saudi Arabia simulations stated in after action reviews their belief that the U.S. must recruit, train, and deploy the right people with the right skills, including a mix of government and non-government thinkers. There was also a note that the USG lacked a cabinet level information agency dedicated to developing and disseminating the U.S. narrative and to countering enemy narratives.

In their after-action reviews, participants in the foreign fighter scenario focused on the difficulties of developing and maintaining a common operating picture across federal, state, and local entities; on the importance of understanding the roles, capabilities, and authorities of each entity; on the importance of accurate and timely intelligence, and how to share information to best effect across agencies where security clearance levels vary.

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### [Demystifying Gray Zone Conflict: A Typology of Conflict Dyads and Instruments of Power in Colombia, 2002-present](#) *Koven, B. (University of Maryland, START)*

This case study elucidates the dynamics of Gray Zone conflict with particular emphasis on the role of non- state actors. It does so through a detailed examination of the most recent phase (2002-present) of Colombia’s internal conflict (1964-present). More specifically, this research analyzes conflict dyads occurring between different types of conflict actors. It further examines which types of dyads leverage which instruments of power and to what extent activities are Gray versus Black or White across each type of dyad and instrument of power. Consequently, this research will help practitioners determine which instruments of power warrant careful consideration in Gray Zone conflicts depending on the types of actors engaged in conflict. This investigation will also aid Special Operations Forces in determining which types of belligerents may make effective partners and which instruments of power they should train and equip these partners to implement.

This research substantially bounds the scope of what needs to be considered by state forces operating in these environments. Specifically, the analysis shows that aggregating by actor-type is effective and that actors of the same type (e.g. leftist insurgents) behave very similarly. Moreover, it reduces the number of instruments of power that need to be considered for each type of conflict dyad. Even though five of the six types of conflict dyads entail multiple instruments of power, and the most complex dyad (government versus insurgents) involves six of the seven instruments, the average type of conflict dyad includes just 2.5 of the seven instruments.

☒Furthermore, this analysis demonstrates that Colombia’s conflict is Gray. While, Gray Zone dynamics also include White and Black activities, five (Government versus Insurgents, Government versus

BACRIM Syndicates, Insurgents versus Insurgents, Insurgents versus Paramilitaries, and Insurgents versus BACRIM Syndicates) of the six types of dyads involve Gray activities. Gray Zone activities are especially prominent in four (Government versus Insurgents, Insurgents versus Insurgents, Insurgents versus Paramilitaries, and Insurgents versus BACRIM Syndicates) of these cases. The only dyad (Government versus Paramilitaries) that did not include Gray activities was extremely short-lived and involved the paramilitaries quickly acquiescing to government pressure to demobilize.

While the approach adopted by this research entails myriad advantages readers should be cautioned that Gray Zone conflicts are extremely complex. Practitioners ought to consider how an intervention against one type of conflict actor might affect other types of belligerents. Only by doing so will they avoid negative externalities such as inadvertently strengthening other combatants. Moreover, commanders must recognize that the successful use of certain tactics by the state or their proxies within one instrument of power (e.g. military), can have profound effects on the efficacy of their opponent's use of other instruments (e.g. informational). Finally, this case provides numerous examples of government forces collaborating with various, violent non-state actors. While Special Operations Forces are especially well positioned to do so, this requires extensive situational awareness at the micro-level. Alliances are fleeting and the willingness to cooperate with Special Operations Forces varies both over space and time.

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## Demystifying Gray Zone Conflict: A Typology of Conflict Dyads and Instruments of Power in Libya, 2014-present

*Gabriel, R. & Johns, M. (University of Maryland, START)*

This case study is intended to highlight the dynamics of Gray Zone conflict in Libya since 2014. It places specific emphasis on the roles of non-state actors within the conflict and how these actors utilize different levels of power to achieve their aims. With a focus on analyzing the dyadic relationships between various types of conflict actors, this research examines which types of dyads employ which instruments of power, as well as to what extent these activities fall within the Gray Zone of conflict as opposed to the more precisely delineated Black and White arenas. This research aims to assist practitioners and policy makers in determining how the types of actors involved in a conflict can influence which instruments of power deserve special consideration in that conflict. This investigation will also aid Special Operations Forces (SOF) in determining which types of belligerents may make effective partners depending on the type of adversary faced, and which instruments of power SOF should train and equip these partners to implement.

This research substantially bounds the scope of what needs to be considered by U.S. forces operating in these environments. Specifically, the analysis shows that aggregating by actor-type is effective. Aggregating Libya's myriad actors into four distinct groups, which include internationally recognized governing bodies, rival political factions (hereby referred to as "rival governments"), local religiously-affiliated violent non-state actors (VSNAs) and transnational VSNAs (e.g. the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)), allows practitioners to identify the most relevant instruments of power at play given the actor-types engaged in the conflict. Moreover, this analysis reduces the number of instruments

of power that must be thoroughly considered in each conflict dyad from seven to an average of 4.5. Of these 4.5, an average of just 2 instruments of power are especially salient.

Furthermore, this analysis demonstrates that Libya's conflict is Gray. While Gray Zone dynamics also include White and Black activities, all four of the dyads involve Gray activities. This study finds that competition between the elected and/or internationally recognized governing bodies and rival governments primarily occur across the diplomatic, informational, military, economic, financial and legal instruments of power. The situation in Libya is such that competing political groups have all had periods of international recognition and legitimacy at certain times and not others. During periods where a government has international recognition and legitimacy, it tends to prioritize White Zone diplomatic engagement and legal activities. When rival political groups are not internationally recognized, they have employed Gray Zone diplomatic negotiations, information engagement and financial activity in addition to Black Zone military and economic action.

Religiously affiliated VSNA's (including ISIL and al-Qaeda (AQ) affiliates) are also involved in the conflict. Notably, information engagement occurring within the Gray Zone is the most potent instrument of power used by such groups regardless of the adversary, followed by Black Zone military action. When competing against government aligned forces, these VSNA's have similarly engaged in Gray Zone financial activity. Local VSNA's have engaged in Gray Zone diplomatic negotiations with international actors. In its competition against government-aligned forces, ISIL has employed Black Zone economic activities.

When evaluating responses to conflicts involving governments and rival governments, practitioners should devote significant attention to the use of diplomatic and legal instruments of power as they have proven to be especially consequential. When addressing dyads involving religiously-affiliated VSNA's, practitioners should pay particular attention to the informational and military instruments of power, as these instruments of power influence the use of the other instruments.

While the approach adopted by this research entails myriad advantages, readers should be cautioned that Gray Zone conflicts are extremely complex. Practitioners ought to consider how an intervention against one type of conflict actor might affect other types of actors operating in the same space. This is necessary to avoid negative externalities, such as inadvertently strengthening other combatants. Moreover, commanders must realize that the successful use of certain tactics within one instrument of power (e.g. military), can have profound effects on the efficacy of their opponent's use of other instruments (e.g. economic or informational). Finally this case provides numerous examples of government forces collaborating with various VSNA's. While Special Operations Forces are especially well positioned to do so, this requires extensive situational awareness at the micro-level as the micro and macro conflict landscapes are mutually constitutive and are thus highly reactive to disturbances on all levels. Alliances are fleeting and the willingness to cooperate with Special Operations Forces varies both over space and time.

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## The Conflict in the Donbas between Gray and Black: The Importance of Perspective *Finkel, E. (University of Maryland, START)*

The current case study analyzes the presence and importance of Gray Zone conflict dynamics and the employment of various instruments of power during the still ongoing conflict in Eastern Ukraine (Donbas) since its beginning in 2014. More specifically, it studies the use of various instruments of power across a number of conflict dyads, present in the conflict. The case study's findings can better inform practitioners and analysts about the presence, content, and effectiveness of utilizing different instruments of power in the Gray Zone.

The analysis covers the participation of various entities and groups, operating in the Donbas: the governments of two states, Russia and Ukraine; the initially independent volunteer formations on the Ukrainian side; and two quasi-state insurgent entities. The analysis uncovers numerous Gray Zone interactions across several dyads, but also demonstrated the limits of the Gray Zone both as a set of empirical actions and as a conceptual approach to understanding the conflict itself. This study shows that Gray Zone activities exist to varying degrees in all dyads, but they are most pronounced in the Ukrainian versus Russian governments dyad.

In addition to uncovering and analyzing the existing Gray Zone dynamics, the case study also argues that Special Operation Forces should pay substantial attention to preexisting perceptions, media framings and worldviews in devising general Gray Zone policies and actions. Thus, the analysis shows that the classification of the conflict in the Donbas as a Gray Zone conflict is possible only if the emphasis is put on the interactions between the Russian and the Ukrainian governments as the primary driver and cause of the violence. However, if the attention is shifted towards domestic, rather than geopolitical causes of the violence, the conflict is more properly classified as a Black Zone conflict. These differences in classification can have substantial impact on the specific policies and actions, adopted by Special Operations Forces.

The analysis also shows that in practice, Gray Zone dynamics are extremely complicated and involve numerous actors and activities, often operating independently of one another. Based on the analysis of the Russian government's actions, the report demonstrates the inherent difficulties and limitations of Gray Zone actions, especially under conditions of large scale conflict. The report also shows that Gray Zone activities that utilize some instruments of power can and do operate simultaneously with both Black and White Zone activities that leverage other instruments. This suggests that the Zones are not exclusive across the entire spectrum of instruments. Rather, they are instrument-specific, thus offering Special Operation Forces a wide spectrum of potential actions to choose from.

Finally, the analysis shows that many of the Gray Zone activities, utilized by non-state actors on both sides of the conflict are driven by primarily financial considerations and have a substantial criminal component. Practitioners, devising the application of Gray Zone tactics by non-state actors should be aware of potential implications of Gray Zone activities for law and order.

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## Discourse Indicators of Gray Zone Activity: South China Sea Case Study

*Kuznar, L., Popp, G. & Peterson, N. (NSI, Inc)*

The increasing use of emotive themes and rhetorical devices (that amplify a message's emotional effect) provide indicators of gray zone activities in speeches made by Chinese, Philippine, and Vietnamese government officials during peak times of conflict in the South China Sea from 2002 to 2016. The leading indicators and warnings for the Chinese, Philippine, and Vietnamese governments are presented separately, as well as findings regarding how their use of language reflects predominant national concerns.

### *Indicators & Warnings (I&W)*

The 16-year period examined was divided into six-month periods, and measures of theme use were correlated with the frequency of gray zone activity initiated by each actor in the subsequent period. This enabled identification of indicators and warnings approximately six months in advance of gray zone actions.

- The specific themes that indicated Chinese gray zone activity included Conspiracy, Self-defense, Equality and Rights, Gray Zone Activities, and Domestic Development.
- Criminal/Illegal, Borders/Territory, Crime, Oil/Gas, Materiel, Protests, Friendship, and China were the primary indicators for the Philippine gray zone activity.
- Aggressor/Aggression, Legitimacy, Economy and Trade, UN, and Lexicalization indicated Vietnamese gray activity.

### *Predominant Concerns of Regional Actors*

The themes that occur statistically more often for each actor provide an indicator of what issues are most important for that actor.

- Chinese, Philippine, and Vietnamese governments share a mutual concern for their borders, their territories, and their own nation's prosperity.
- China also outwardly reveals their preoccupations with peace, stability, sovereignty, cooperation, and the South China Sea.
- The Philippines, like the Chinese, also display a strong concern about the South China Sea, cooperation, China, and sovereignty and also have a strong interest in conflict, equality and rights, their economy and trade, and formal agreements.
- Vietnam, like the Philippines, is predominately concerned with conflict as well as peace, like the Chinese, and security.

### *Use of Emotional Language*

The use of emotional language (themes that evoke emotion such as Pride, or rhetorical devices such as Sarcasm) indicates the importance of an issue for an actor.

- The Vietnamese used over twice as much moderate to extremely negative language as the Chinese did when discussing South China Sea matters and the countries involved. This may indicate that they feel most threatened by Chinese actions in the South China Sea. There were no statistically discernable differences between the Chinese and Philippine leaders.

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## Discourse Indicators of Gray Zone Activity: Russian-Estonian Relations Case Study

*Kuznar, L., Popp, G. & Peterson, N. (NSI, Inc)*

The increasing use of emotive themes and rhetorical devices (that amplify a message's emotional effect) provide indicators of gray zone activities in speeches made by Eurasian regional leaders and has the potential to provide leading indicators and reveal key issues and concerns.

### *Indicators & Warnings (I&W)*

- Putin exhibits a sustained concern over Europe and the threat of Nazism, consistent with earlier studies (Kuznar, 2016b).
- The overall sentiment between the Putin and Estonian governments demonstrates increasingly negative relations between the two countries.

### *Predominant Concerns of Regional Actors*

- The Putin government predictably stresses the plight of Russian Minorities in Estonia, and the need for Cooperation in its discourses on Estonia.
- Ethnic Russian-Estonians emphasizes their ethnic Identity.
- The Estonian government stresses the need for Cooperation.

### *Use of Emotional Language*

- The Estonian government used nearly five times the amount of emotional language (emotional themes and rhetorical devices) used by the Putin government.
  - This pattern reflects other studies that have demonstrated that the Putin government generally uses much more restrained language than other leaders (Kuznar, Popp, & Peterson, 2017; Kuznar & Yager, 2016).
  - This restrained language may be an indicator that the Putin government is more vulnerable to traditional deterrence operations (USSTRATCOM, 2006), provided that their values are accurately identified.

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## Discourse Indicators of Gray Zone Activity: Crimean Annexation Case Study

*Kuznar, L., Popp, G. & Peterson, N. (NSI, Inc)*

The increasing use of emotive themes and rhetorical devices (that amplify a message's emotional effect) provide indicators of gray zone activities in speeches made by Eurasian regional leaders prior to and during the annexation of Crimea. Putin's leading indicators, those of Crimean leaders and the Russian-supported President of Ukraine, Viktor Yanukovich, are presented separately.

### *Indicators & Warnings (I&W)*

The primary findings regarding Russian government leading indicators are focused on Putin and include:

1. As a general pattern, Putin is more restrained in his language than most Western leaders, making indicators of his intent rare.

2. The rarity of these indicators increases the ability to detect them as statistical “blips” in his language use; a thing that rarely appears is noticeable when it occurs.
3. When Putin mentions key emotive issues, they occur suddenly as a “blip” in his general discourse in advance of operations. However, he is disciplined in subsequently silencing himself during apparent planning and execution phases.
4. However, once his goal is achieved, he relaxes his restraint and releases a rhetorical flourish of concerns and emotional language (a “brag”).
5. After a rhetorical flourish, Putin again restrains his discourse when planning and executing operations to achieve his next strategic goal.
6. The blip patterns that may be detected are manifest in emotional themes such as Pride, Protection, Unity, Strength, and Russian Superiority, and political themes such as Russian Security, mentioning Adversaries, Russian Energy, and the Ceasefire.
7. Putin exhibits a sustained and increasing apparent concern with Russian Energy Resources and the Threat of Nazism, consistent with earlier studies.
8. Putin is demonstrating an increasing concern with Turkey, which may have direct implications for his intentions in Syria.

The primary findings regarding Crimean leaders and government include detectable blips approximately a month and a half before the annexation in emotive themes that include:

1. Fear of Extremism, Failure of the Ukrainian government (an enemy), desire for Stability, Independence, Legitimacy of Crimean cause, Unity of Crimeans, Separatism, Sovereignty for Crimea, a sarcastic claim to be open to Cooperation, and use of the rhetorical device of Accusation.
2. There is a curious “blip and brag” pattern in the mention of the ingroup (Crimea), their friend (Russia) and primary enemy (Ukraine).

Russian-supported President of Ukraine Viktor Yanukovich

1. There were no detectable leading indicators for the Russian-supported Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich, but this may be due to the fact that his speeches ended four months before the annexation of Crimea, and perhaps more relevantly, Yanukovich may have had more pressing concerns as his hold on power was failing at this time.

Predominant Concerns of Regional Actors

2. The pervasive concerns of the Putin government were Economics and Trade, not expansion, Russian imperialism, or national pride.
3. The pro-Russian President of Ukraine, Viktor Yanukovich, expressed views identical to those of the Putin government, indicating his ideological alignment, if not direct control, by the Kremlin.

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## Violent Non-state Actors in the Gray Zone A Virtual Think Tank Analysis (ViTTa)

*Canna, S., Peterson, N. & Popp, G. (NSI, Inc.)*

Using the Virtual Think Tank (ViTTa) expert elicitation methodology, NSI asked six leading gray zone experts whether Violent Non-state Actors (VNSAs) belong in the definition of the gray zone. However, experts were reticent to answer this question; they thought the question missed the point. The focus should not be how to define the major threats that are facing the USG, but rather how to leverage all instruments of national power to respond to them. When pushed to answer the original question, experts largely conceded that VNSAs, by themselves, do not rise to a level of significant threat in the gray zone, but are key tools used by state actors to achieve their ends. They concluded by identifying other challenges and solutions facing the USG in the gray zone.

In January 2016, General Joseph Votel (US Army) requested that the Strategic Multi-Layer Assessment (SMA) office examine how the United States Government (USG) can diagnose, identify, and assess indirect strategies, and develop response options against, associated types of gray zone challenges. More specifically, the request emphasized that if the USG is to respond effectively to the threats and opportunities presented in the increasingly gray security environment, it requires a much more detailed map of the gray zone than it currently possesses. One core question raised by General Votel was whether violent non-state actors (VNSAs), like violent extremist organizations (VEOs) and transnational criminal organizations (TCOs), fit into the definition of the gray zone.

To respond to this question, NSI applied its Virtual Think Tank (ViTTa) expert elicitation methodology to the problem set. As part of this effort, NSI interviewed six leading gray zone experts (see Table 1 and Appendix A) on whether, and under what conditions, VNSAs rise to a level of significant threat in the gray zone.

Their answers surprised us.

### *We Asked the Wrong Question*

We initiated this effort with the objective of defining when and under what conditions VEOs and TCOs fit into the definition of the gray zone. However, experts were reticent to answer this question; they thought the question missed the point. The focus should not be how to define the major threats that are facing the USG, but rather how to leverage all instruments of national power to respond to them.

However, despite challenging the premise of the question, David Maxwell suggested that exercises like this one are useful not so much in determining the “right answer,” but rather to engage in a meaningful discussion that will help the nation better assess the challenges it faces, develop effective courses of action, and formulate plans to achieve key objectives. “Ultimately, the focus should not be on whether or not a conflict should fall into the gray zone. The US tends to try to organize everything into a clear category or create a clear label for everything,” Maxwell stated. The gray zone is ambiguous and complex, and is not suited to clear, crisp definitions.

Similarly, Adam Elkus noted that although the US would like to develop a clear dividing line between conflict and competition including who can engage in gray zone activities, other countries (primarily non-Western ones) do not think about achieving state objectives in this way. That makes it easier for them to exploit US relations without severe repercussions. Despite these reservations, we did ask the experts to respond to the original question.

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## The Characterization and Conditions of the Gray Zone: A Virtual Think Tank Analysis (ViTTa)

*Popp, G. (NSI, Inc.)*

Within United States government (USG) and Department of Defense (DoD) spheres, the gray zone is a relatively new terminology and phenomena of focus for characterizing the changing nature of competition, conflict, and warfare between actors in the evolving international system of today. Accordingly, in January 2016, General Joseph Votel (US Army) requested that the Strategic Multi-Layer Assessment (SMA) team conduct a study of the gray zone. The SMA team was asked to assess how the USG can diagnose, identify, and assess indirect strategies, and develop response options against associated types of gray zone challenges. More specifically, the request emphasized that if the USG is to respond effectively to the threats and opportunities presented in the increasingly gray security environment, it requires a much more detailed map of the gray zone than it currently possesses.

To properly conduct any effort focused on researching, understanding, and assessing this gray zone space, it is imperative to first ensure that the effort is using sound, appropriate, and comprehensive definitions—to effectively assess the gray zone, one must appropriately define the gray zone. The importance of proper definitions is particularly relevant when it comes to the study of the gray zone, which is an inherently ambiguous concept in itself and has a number of varying definitions already in existence.

Recognizing the importance of properly characterizing and defining the gray zone concept, the SMA team put significant effort into developing a sound, comprehensive definition of the gray zone. Through a series of panel discussions and intense inter-team discussions, and with the assistance of a white paper on the topic, the SMA team, in conjunction with USSOCOM, developed the following definitions for the gray zone, gray zone activity, and gray zone threats.

The **gray zone** is a conceptual space between peace and war, occurring when actors purposefully use multiple elements of power to achieve political-security objectives with activities that are ambiguous or cloud attribution and exceed the threshold of ordinary competition, yet fall below the level of large-scale direct military conflict, and threaten US and allied interests by challenging, undermining, or violating international customs, norms, or laws.

*Gray zone activity* is an adversary's purposeful use of single or multiple elements of power to achieve security objectives by way of activities that are ambiguous or cloud attribution, and exceed the threshold of ordinary competition, yet apparently fall below the level of open warfare.

- In most cases, once significant, attributable coercive force has been used, the activities are no longer considered to be in the gray zone but have transitioned into the realm of traditional warfare.
- While gray zone activities may involve non-security domains and elements of national power, they are activities taken by an actor for the purpose of gaining some broadly-defined security advantage over another.

*Gray zone threats* are actions of a state or non-state actor that challenge or violate international customs, norms, and laws for the purpose of pursuing one or more broadly-defined national security interests without provoking direct military response.

- Gray zone threats can occur in three ways relative to international rules and norms, they can:
  1. challenge common understandings, conventions, and international norms while stopping short of clear violations of international law (e.g., much of China’s use of the “Little Blue Men”);
  2. employ violations of both international norms and laws in ways intended to avoid the penalties associated with legal violations (e.g., Russian activities in Crimea); or
  3. violent extremist organizations (VEOs) and non-state actors integrating elements of power to advance particular security interests

In an effort to validate the SMA team’s definition of the gray zone, NSI applied its Virtual Think Tank (ViTTa) subject matter expert elicitation methodology to the problem set. As part of this ViTTa effort, NSI interviewed leading gray zone experts to better understand the characterization and conditions of the gray zone, putting particular emphasis on having the experts assess the SMA team’s gray zone definition. NSI recorded and transcribed the interviews, which formed the basis of this report. The goal of this report is to present the experts’ insights relating to the characterization and conditions of the gray zone and, in particular, highlight expert feedback, insight, and commentary regarding the SMA team’s gray zone definition.

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## Demystifying Gray Zone Conflict: A Typology of Conflict Dyads and Instruments of Power in Colombia, Libya and Ukraine

*Koven, B. (START)*

The National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism (START) has been tasked with providing support to the Special Operations Command (SOCOM) Gray Zone project undertaken as a Strategic Multilayer Assessment (SMA) initiative. Part of this support included the preparation of qualitative case studies covering three diverse Gray Zone conflicts: Colombia (2002-present), Libya (2014-present) and Ukraine (2014-present). Each case study builds upon the following working definition of Gray Zones:

*“The Gray Zone is a conceptual space between peace and war, occurring when actors purposefully use multiple instruments of power to achieve political-security objectives with activities that are ambiguous or cloud attribution and exceed the threshold of ordinary competition, yet fall below the level of large-scale direct military conflict, and threaten US and allied interests by challenging, undermining, or violating international customs, norms, or laws.”*

More specifically, extensive focus is directed to the role of the myriad, violent non-state actors (VNSAs) present in each conflict. The case studies elucidate that given the confluence of a diverse array of actors and the seven distinct instruments of power (diplomatic, informational, military, economic, financial, intelligence and legal), which can be leveraged in prosecuting the conflict within White, Gray and/or Black domains, Gray Zone environments are particularly complex. Beyond merely illustrating this fact, the country reports are designed to help bound the scope for practitioners

attempting to understand and possibly intervene in these dynamics. This is accomplished in two ways. First, we observed that actors of the same type largely behave comparably when facing the identical types of adversaries within the same conflict. Consequently, actors can be aggregated by types (e.g., treating various leftist insurgencies as a group or collapsing the myriad localized Islamist groups into a single category in Libya) without substantial loss of fidelity.

While the use of the aforementioned typology is helpful, the studies' real innovation is that they focus on conflict dyads. Rather than consider the entire conflict – with its still numerous actor-types – as a whole, these reports break down and analyze the conflict one dyadic configuration of belligerents at a time. We found that belligerents of the same type prioritize certain instruments and Zones when facing one type of actor and other instruments and Zones against other actor-types. For example international legitimacy is very important for some types of VNSAs. Consequently, these groups may prioritize White and/or Gray diplomatic and informational instruments when confronting the government. However, Gray and/or Black Zone activities within the military instrument may predominate in their conflict with other VNSAs, since these dyads are less likely to affect international perceptions. The average Colombian conflict dyad involves just 2.5 of the seven instruments. In Libya, the average is a bit higher at 4.5 instruments. However, on average, just 2 are particularly salient. Ukraine similarly experiences an average of 4.5 relevant instruments of power across all dyads. Nevertheless, this average is inflated by the Ukrainian government versus Russian government dyad, which involves all seven instruments.

This report proceeds in four sections. The first section provides background on each case and the relevant actors therein. The subsequent section describes the data leveraged and the methodology employed by the studies. The penultimate section elaborates on the approach utilized and key findings. The final section concludes. In doing so it also offers advice for practitioners.

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## [US Discoverable Government Information Assets Directory](#)

*Bragg, B., Pagano, S., & Stevenson, J. (NSI, Inc.)*

The US “Discoverable Government Information Assets” Directory (US-DiGIA for short) resource catalogues the discoverable information assets (practical information, data, analysis, and subject matter expertise) relevant to national security and foreign policy held by the USG in a simple, easy-to-use searchable directory.

The US-DiGIA Directory is focused on “discoverable” information assets—that is, those information assets that are both open source (unclassified) and made available and/or identified as information assets held by the organizations that the NSI team examined. By focusing on which information assets are “discoverable,” this mapping does not claim to represent the true distribution of information assets across the whole-of-government, but instead captures what can be observed and obtained through unclassified channels—and thus potentially accessed via an interagency process.

US-DiGIA compiles and categorizes the information assets of 236 offices across 22 combined US government departments, agencies, and corporations (referred to collectively as “USG

organizations”). US-DiGIA catalogues 1,305 unique information topics culled from these combined sources, and accounts for 1,980 total information topics (as some offices work on overlapping issues).

### *What Type of Content is in the US-DiGIA Directory?*

The searchable US-DiGIA Directory is instantiated in Excel format and includes:

- A unique id number for each row of data
- USG Department, Agency, or Corporation name
- Relevant sub-office names
- Coding for geographic AOI (at the most specific level of information provided or inferred)
- Almost 2,000 information topics for which the organizations and offices examined hold information assets
- **Gray-zone tailored** information elements (broader gray-zone relevant categories into which the information topics are binned)
- Website and contact information (when relevant)

### *Examples of How US-DiGIA Can be Used*

US-DiGIA can be used in multiple ways, including but not limited to the following:

#### *Search by specific information topic*

- Explore which organizations are working on which information topics
- Examine the geographic coverage for information topics
- Find relevant sub-offices that hold information on information topics listed

#### *Search by gray zone element*

- Explore which organizations are working on which topics
- Examine the geographic coverage for gray zone elements
- Find relevant sub-offices that hold information on gray zone elements listed

#### *Search by geographic region*

- Explore which information topics and information elements are being covered in a specific geographic region of interest

#### *Search by department/agency or office*

- Explore all of the discoverable information topics on which a given department, agency, or office is working
- Examine all of the discoverable gray zone elements on which a given department, agency, or office is working

#### *Search by the conjunction of categories above*

#### *Search for website links or contact information for a department/agency or office*

- Where provided by the organization

### *Who Should Use US-DiGIA?*

US-DiGIA is a resource for defense analysts, operators, researchers, forecasters, and policy-makers seeking to locate discoverable, unclassified *information assets* within the United States Government.

US-DiGIA can decrease the time to task completion and expand and enhance the breadth of *information asset* inputs. US-DiGIA is thus for users who need to minimize time to *information asset* discovery, to more efficiently cull and review information needed to complete tasks and inform critical decisions.

US-DiGIA is also a resource for those seeking to develop whole-of-government strategies. It provides users with a consolidated resource that enables quick and easy identification of multiple organizations and offices addressing the same topics, in turn enabling identification of potential partners for inter-agency collaboration.

Directory available on request: bbragg@nsiteam.com

## US-DiGIA: Overview and Methodology of US Discoverable Government Information Assets Directory

*Pagano, S. & Stevenson, J. (NSI, Inc.)*

To create the US-DiGIA, the NSI team developed a methodological process (detailed below in the section entitled, “US-DiGIA Mapping Methodology Process”) for taking the unstructured data culled from USG organization websites examined and translating them into information assets. The NSI team created an extended record of data sources, including mission statements, links to documents and tools, related web pages, and contact information. On the foundation of this rich source of information, the NSI team in turn developed the US-DiGIA Directory.

## US-DiGIA: Mapping the USG Discoverable Information Terrain: Sources of national security and foreign policy information with a focus on gray zone identification and response activities

*Bragg, B. (NSI, Inc.)*

The Directory of Discoverable US Government Information Assets (US-DiGIA), which provides a tool that enables users to search for and locate open source USG information assets, and possible points of contact for interagency collaboration.

The US-DiGIA Directory can also be analyzed to provide an overview of the USG discoverable information terrain. This report presents some of the key findings of our analysis of the directory. Part 2 focuses on the subset of information assets relevant to gray zone challenges. It also demonstrates how tailored coding for specific issues or security concerns can increase the utility of the US-DiGIA directory for users with specific information needs.

We organized our analysis in each part around the three foundational whole-of-government questions that guided the structure of the directory itself.

1. *What* national security and foreign policy related information does the USG currently collect and hold?
2. *Who* (which organizations) collects and holds that information?
3. *Where* geographically are our information assets focused?

## US-DiGIA: Mapping the USG Discoverable Information Terrain: Executive Summary *Bragg, B. (NSI, Inc.)*

The United States currently faces a complex and dynamic security environment. States are no longer the only critical actors in the international arena; rather, a diverse range of non-state entities also has the potential to affect US interests and security—for good or bad. Economic influence, information control and propaganda, political influence, and social discontent can be and are being utilized by state and non-state actors alike to achieve their goals, in many cases bypassing the need for direct military action. In response, the US military is challenged to accomplish more, across a greater variety of domains, while facing a constrained budget environment. There are two central implications of this: first, many of the most intractable security problems the US faces require a whole of government approach. Second, in a complex and evolving international environment characterized by new and often ambiguous threats, information itself is a critical asset.

If USSOCOM and others were able to leverage these existing extant sources of information, data and expertise (i.e. *information assets*) held by the USG, the cost and time savings from avoiding duplication of effort would be potentially immense. In an effort to enable this, the NSI team “mapped” the USG information terrain, cataloguing all discoverable (unclassified, published, and referenced or held online) information assets relevant to national security and foreign policy held across the non-DoD and non-ODNI USG organizations.

This effort resulted in the Directory of Discoverable US Government Information Assets (US-DiGIA), which provides a tool that enables users to search for and locate open source USG information assets, and possible points of contact for interagency collaboration.

## From Control to Influence: Cognition in the Grey Zone *Wright, N. (University of Birmingham, ICCS)*

## Violating Normal: How International Norms Transgressions Magnify Gray Zone Challenges

*Stevenson, J., Bragg, B. & Pagano, S. (NSI, Inc.)*

### *Overview*

The current international system presents multiple potential challenges to US interests. In recent years, state actors, especially but not limited to Russia and China, have taken actions that disrupt regional stability and potentially threaten US interests (Bragg, 2016). Many of these challenges are neither “traditional” military actions nor “normal” competition, but rather fall into a class of actions we have come to call “gray” (Votel, 2015). Here we define the concept as: “the purposeful use of single or multiple instruments of power to achieve security objectives by way of activities that are typically ambiguous or cloud attribution, and exceed the threshold of ordinary competition, yet intentionally fall below the level of [proportional response and] large-scale direct military conflict,

and threaten the interests of other actors by challenging, undermining, or violating international customs, norms, or laws.” (Popp and Canna, 2016).

Many analyses have focused on the material effects of gray zone actions and gray strategies, such as changes to international borders, or threats to domestic political stability, however few have emphasized the role that international norms play in gray actions and gray strategies, and potential response to them. This paper beings to fill that gap by exploring the normative dimensions of gray zone challenges.

### *The role of norms in international relations*

At the broadest level, norms are rules of behavior that are recognized and understood by a community of nations. In many cases norms go unnoticed until they are violated (Goffman, 1963). International norms represent collective expectations about how other states will act and thus can have significant influence on the behavior of individual actors in the international system. In particular, they can help actors overcome some of the barriers to interstate cooperation. Norms provide solutions to coordination problems (Martin, 1992; Stein, 2004), reduce transaction costs (Ikenberry, 1998; Keohane, 2005), and provide a “language and grammar” for international politics (Kratochwil, 1999; Onuf, 2013). In some cases, such as norms regarding use of chemical weapons or the use of force to change territorial boundaries, norms have been institutionalized and become part of international law. In other cases, such as human rights, international norms reflect widely shared, but not necessarily universal, beliefs.

Among actors in the international system norms provide guidance regarding which behaviors, although not strictly forbidden or illegal are considered unacceptable and liable to censure. Regular compliance with international norms signals that we are dealing with an actor who shares our perspective on how states “should” behave (Shannon, 2000). An actor abiding by relevant norms signals the value it places on those shared standards of behavior, and its intention to play by the established “rules of the game.” Doing so many also increase the willingness of others to engage in political, economic, or security cooperation.

In essence, a pattern of adherence to norms can build trust between actors in an otherwise uncertain system. Trust is “a belief that the other side prefers mutual cooperation to exploiting one’s own cooperation, while mistrust is a belief that the other side prefers exploiting one’s cooperation to returning it” (Kydd, 2005). Trust is important component of understanding the effects of norms violations because that another actor will comply with international norms significantly reduces the kinds of uncertainty that gray zone challenges nurture. As trust deepens, reliance on norms, rather than explicitly stated and formalized rules to regulate behavior, particularly competitive behavior can increase (Bearce & Bondanella, 2007; Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998; Glanville, 2016; Katzenstein, 1996; Klotz, 1995). While international norms are generally understood by states in the global system, we cannot assume that those rules and supporting norms necessarily reflect the domestic values and interests of all states.

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## Gray Zone Deterrence: What It Is and How (Not) to Do It

Stevenson, J. (NSI, Inc.)

### Overview

In recent years, state actors, especially but not limited to Russia and China, have increasingly engaged in what the US Government has labeled “gray zone challenges.”<sup>1</sup> These are actions that disrupt regional stability and potentially threaten US interests, yet purposefully avoid triggering direct responses (Bragg, 2016). In earlier NSI Gray Zone Concept Papers, we argued that both malicious intent as well as violation of international norms for what is considered “ordinary competition” among states were integral aspects of gray zone challenges. This paper expands this discussion to explore what deterrence would look like in the Gray Zone, and how deterrence operates when ambiguity regarding appropriate response is added to the uncertainties that more typically characterize deterrence decisions. We argue that deterrence in the Gray Zone involves both preventing escalation to direct military conflict and assuaging an actor’s desire to violate international norms of behavior.

### Foundations: Thinking through Classic Deterrence Theory

In the classic model of deterrence, a state seeking to deter should credibly threaten to impose negative consequences on a target if the same target does not comply with the action-avoidance request. Similarly, the target must be credibly assured that the deterring state will not impose harmful consequences if it refrains from taking the action.

- A state credibly threatens a target with negative consequences if the target state takes a certain action or violates a prohibition.
- The deterring state credibly assures its target that no negative consequences will follow if compliance is achieved.
- The targeted state refrains from taking the prohibited specific activities.

Academically, classic deterrence theory emerged to explain what to do about the conventional and nuclear force postures of the Soviet Union—a peer competitor that pursued a fundamentally different logic of political and economic order. The United States and the Soviet Union were in a situation of balanced power, and conceptions of deterrence derived in this setting reflected this structure.

Clearly this balanced structure no longer applies. The United States leads the world in military research and development, and enjoys one of the few long-distance power projective capabilities in the world. Moreover, the United States participates in almost every critical security institution (e.g., NATO), helped design the post-war economic institutions (e.g., GATT/WTO, IMF), and possesses military bases on every continent and near every major region of operation (Johnson, 2007; Gilpin, 2001). Our closest near competitors are states like Russia and China, which while opposed to many of the foreign policy choices of the United States and its allies, seek a larger voice in the current order, rather than a fundamentally different logic of political and economic order (Pagano, 2017).

It stands to reason that the principles of deterrence that worked best to contain the Soviet Union may differ from the principles of deterrence that work best to constrain the more limited ambitions of modern Russia and China, competitors of much lesser capability. Classic deterrence principles also

seem limited in providing insight into the conditions under which we are likely to deter non-state actors (or even what deterrence of non-state actors looks like). Many approaches to countering violent non-state mobilization call for the destruction or complete dismantling of the non-state organization. Classic deterrence theory suggests that under these conditions the groups targeted would be “undeterrable,” as there is not likely the level of imposed costs that would get these groups to change their behaviors.

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### [Quantifying Gray Zone Conflict: \(De-\)escalatory Trends in Gray Zone Conflicts in Colombia, Libya and Ukraine](#) *Koven, B. and Piplani, V. (START)*

This report employs frequentist statistical analysis in order to model the effects of various factors, including the type of actors (state, violent non-state actor (VNSA) or civilian) involved and the prevalence of kinetic activity, on (de-)escalatory trends in Gray Zone conflicts. This is coupled with the development of a Bayesian Belief Network for predictive analysis of White, Gray and Black Zone behavior within Gray Zone conflicts.

Both sets of analyses utilize a version of the event-level data from the Worldwide Integrated Crisis Early Warning System (ICEWS). However, we heavily modified this data prior to running the analyses. Specifically, we recoded new variables of particular interest to the study of Gray Zone conflict, addressed erroneous and duplicate entries, and restructured the data in order to model temporal changes. This was accomplished using a hybrid process involving both automated recoding procedures and expert human coders.

Our procedure was applied to three diverse gray zone conflicts: Colombia (01 January 2002 to 19 September 2016), Libya<sup>1</sup> (01 January 2011 to 12 September 2016) and Ukraine (01 January 2014 to 12 September 2016). These conflicts all share two commonalities: they all entail a large amount of Gray Zone activity and myriad VNSAs. Nevertheless, the three cases vary in a number of important respects: the level of foreign involvement, the belligerents’ motives, as well as their guiding ideologies, and their geographic location. Consequently, the results are highly likely to be generalizable to a diverse array of other Gray Zone conflicts.

Three principal findings hold across both methodological approaches and are apparent in multiple cases. First, contrary to popular belief, kinetic military operations are a key aspect of Gray Zone conflicts. While it is true that these events are relatively sparse (around 20% of all events depending on the case), they have substantial influence in shaping non-kinetic events. Second, while VNSAs are less proficient than states at identifying their adversaries (de-)escalation trends, the closer VNSAs are linked to states, the less that this is a problem. Finally, legitimacy matters. For this reason, both VNSA and state forces will moderate their behavior in order to avoid being perceived as the aggressor or engaging in more (easily visible) civilian victimization than their opponents.

## Media Visions of the Gray Zone: Contrasting Geopolitical Narratives in Russian and Chinese Media

*Hinck, R., Manly, J., Kluver, R., & Cooley, S. (Texas A&M University, Mississippi State University)*

The purpose of this effort was to contribute to the Strategic Multilayer Analysis by examining media messaging strategies in Russian and Chinese language media, in order to uncover the role of media narratives in the development of potential conflict scenarios, narrative trajectories that might minimize or maximize the potential for conflict, and the role of high impact episodes in evolving media discourse. The study was built upon two prior year-long studies of geopolitical narratives in Chinese and Russian media conducted by the research team, and we used the conclusions of those previous studies to provide a starting point for this project. This project has sought to gain an in-depth look at Chinese and Russian media strategies in the context of gray zone conflict and the role of those narratives and techniques in signaling geopolitical intent. These findings are then used to generate potential strategies for minimizing conflict narratives and strengthening cooperative narratives in areas where there is geopolitical strain.

The research team conducted comprehensive studies of national media to uncover shifting messaging strategies, narratives, and metaphors that imply, precipitate, or minimize conflict. Drawing upon close to 50 different Chinese and Russian sources, the researchers identified thousands of news items that contributed to the final analysis. The researchers monitored general news trends and narratives in Russian and Chinese media, and conducted specific issue data pulls in Chinese and Russian. Specific data pulls focused on the visit of Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte to the People's Republic of China, the impact of migration (specifically refugee flows), and coverage of the US Presidential election. The Duterte visit was examined because of the ways in which coverage and analysis of that event revealed narratives of US national decline. The 2016 election was included because of the centrality of that process for global discussion on the value and relevance of US political processes and values in global leadership. In addition, several other data pulls related to ongoing geopolitical events were included because of the insight they provide for reflecting on narratives of collaboration and contradiction.

This analysis presumes a media-centric theory of gray zone conflict, that media narratives have a primary role in creating the political and cultural context in which relations with other nations are created. Media (in both traditional and new media formats) has perhaps the greatest role in shaping and disseminating narratives of conflict, cooperation, and those gray spaces in between, as it provides the geopolitical worldview, as it were, to justify specific policies and stances. Finally, the study utilizes the "narrative paradigm," a framework for understanding the power of narratives in political contexts, for discussing potential ways to undermine narratives of conflict.

Overall, *the findings of this study reveal that both Chinese and Russian media present narratives that feature the decline of the US in economic and political influence, as well as a rapid disintegration of US political values.* Russian media narratives, however, are far more critical of the US and the global order than are Chinese, and are typically more confrontational than are Chinese narratives. In the coverage of Duterte's visit to the PRC, for example, Chinese media was cautious in attempting to capitalize on the Philippine President's well-publicized "break" with the US, without antagonizing the US. Russian media coverage of the same event, however, presented Duterte's visit and comments as

vindication of Russian confrontation of the US, and sought to frame the visit as the beginnings of a new “trilateral alliance” between Russia, China, and the Philippines to confront and challenge US hegemony in the Pacific region.

The data around the US presidential election, likewise, sought to demonstrate the failings of US style democracy. Both Russian and Chinese media generally portrayed the election as a farce, and evidence of clear US hypocrisy regarding democratic values. Overall, extensive media coverage undermined US prestige and “soft power” and sought to portray both Russia and China as vindicated in the court of global opinion.

This analysis, however, found significant and important differences between the overall tone of Russian and Chinese geopolitical narratives. Chinese media articulated concerns and complaints about the global order, and that China should rightfully take a greater role in global affairs. However, Chinese media sought to include China into the mainstream of the existing global order, and complain about exclusion from the current system. Russian media, however, sought to delegitimize the current world order, and to replace it with something less beholden to US and European interests. Overall, Russian media enacted a “gray zone” character much more frequently, in utilizing ambiguity, aggression, and perceived injustice to expand Russian interests against those of the Western world. Conversely, Chinese media sought much more frequently to argue for China’s full inclusion and participation in global affairs, and rarely portrayed the current global system as wholly corrupt and controlled by the US and Europe.

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## Integration Report: Gray Zone Conflicts, Challenges, and Opportunities

*Bragg, B. (NSI, Inc.)*

United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) requested a Strategic Multilayer Assessment (SMA) effort “to determine how the USG can identify, diagnose, and assess indirect strategies, and develop response options against associated types of gray zone conflicts.” This integration report provides a synthesis of all the team projects. Their work has advanced understanding of the contours of the gray zone terrain, and the challenges inherent in navigating that terrain. By identifying the critical features of the gray zone, their findings also provide a guide to where USSOCOM and other DoD entities should focus future efforts in this area to facilitate the development of operational level planning and response strategies. This report provides an integrated synthesis of all the team findings and recommendations, and identifies key themes emerging from the project as a whole. It is structured around USSOCCOM’s four key questions:

1. What is the nature of gray zone conflict?
2. What motivates actors to engage in gray zone activities?
3. How should the US respond to gray zone activities?
4. What capabilities does the US need to respond effectively to gray zone activities?

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